

Senator pushes access to Indian health clinics

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WASHINGTON -- The new chairman of the Senate Indian Affairs Committee is aiming to increase clinic hours and doctor availability on reservations.

Sen. Byron Dorgan, D-N.D., who became chairman of the committee when Democrats took control of Congress this year, said he is working with the Indian Health Service to craft a bill to encourage more low-cost health care options for American Indians.

"We have very serious problems in health care," he said. "I'd like to see a different model that provides more access for more hours and more days with walk-in health clinics."

Dorgan also said he will push to immediately confirm a new head of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. President Bush nominated Carl J. Artman to oversee the agency last year, but the nomination was held up in the Senate. Artman would replace Dave Anderson, who resigned in February 2005.

"It's absolutely shameful that it's been vacant," Dorgan said. "It will be two years next month. We've got really serious, gripping problems on Indian reservations."

The committee approved the nomination last year but it never moved to the Senate floor because of an unidentified Republican senator who used a procedural move to block it.

Dorgan said the committee also will push initiatives to help the many Indians who suffer from diabetes, and to curb teen violence and boredom on reservations.

The committee also will be saddled with looking for ways to settle a 10-year-old class-action lawsuit against the Interior Department. A group of Indians accuses the government of mismanaging more than \$100 billion in oil, gas, timber and other royalties from Indian lands, dating to 1887.

Dorgan and the previous committee chairman, Sen. John McCain, R-Arizona, introduced legislation last session to try to settle the dispute. But all sides still have not come to agreement.

Dorgan said he has talked to Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne about the lawsuit and is waiting for the department to send the committee a proposed settlement estimate.

"I would hope if there's a way to settle this between the plaintiffs and the government out of court and get it behind us, I would hope we would do that," Dorgan said.

Wyoming Sen. Craig Thomas, the top Republican on the committee, has less enthusiasm for a congressional role in the dispute.

"It's pretty much up to the tribes and the administration," he said. "I don't think it ought to be up to us to decide how it happens."

Thomas said economic development on traditionally poor reservations will be his top priority. Both Dorgan and Thomas said they would like to convene an economic policy conference to figure out better ways to bring jobs to tribes.

"Some of the highest rates of unemployment are on Indian reservations," Dorgan said. "If you don't give people the opportunity to move up and out of poverty with a good job that pays well, what's going to happen is that poverty will continue to be pervasive."